

## “A Lofty View on China’s Healthcare Parity Challenge”

■ A Pfizer GHF Essay by Connie Lieu, July 2012

I’m a 2012 Pfizer Global Health fellow working with Project HOPE in Shanghai, China. One of my key deliverables is to develop a manual with a structured framework to serve as a roadmap for new programs to strengthen health on non-communicable disease prevention, intervention, and management for patients, families and health care providers. In this role, I have learned and gained a great deal of exposure, appreciation, and understanding of the challenges China faces in delivering healthcare and bringing health opportunities to all people across China. Providing quality, effective and low cost healthcare to all its citizens is not a unique challenge facing China as many other advanced nations, including the United States, are battling with the same goal. However, China does have some unique challenges, and we’ll examine one of these challenges, health parity, in depth as I believe it is the “linchpin” and also the foundation to solving many related challenges.

China is predominately a public healthcare driven system, covering the largest population of any nation in the world and dealing with accessibility issues as discrepancies increase between urban cities versus rural communities and coastal versus inland regions. Thus, it will certainly require a different path and approach from that of other nations. There is no doubt in my mind that China very much understands it’s challenges, however, what approaches China takes and how responsive it is to making appropriate decisions along the way will determine its success in reaching that goal in a timely manner.

1. I believe the biggest challenge China faces is the healthcare parity gap between the different provinces due to the rapid and unparalleled development in urban cities and rural areas. China will need to effectively and quickly bring success to ‘normalize the healthcare baseline’ by bringing healthcare parity across its nation, especially between rural and city settings. One way to do that is to invest in building healthcare infrastructure and improving health systems in rural and inland areas to meet the needs of its rural population while lessening the burden on cities due to the flood of people that travel from far away into the cities and have to endure long waits to get quality care. As an example, several of the hospitals that I had visited had approximately 30-80% of its daily patients from outside its area; the extra volume of patients resulted in long waiting lines and typically in the formation of separate lines for each step in the care process. A parent with a child patient may have to wait in 3 different lines, one for the initial doctor consultation, a second line to get a recommended x-ray, and yet a third line to get a blood test, before returning to the doctor for further assessment and consultation. The advantages China has is that its centralized policy and decision-making system has produced some of the best public hospitals in China, and there are excellent examples of successful pilots in health care infrastructure improvements in second and third tier cities. These advantages plus strategic partnerships with NGOs and results from research models can serve to develop a ‘healthcare model and roadmap’ for rural healthcare improvements and bring about a normalized healthcare baseline.

2. The second component to bring about health parity is to formalize network structure that creates a “tightly integrated operational and collaborative web” between model hospitals in cities and rural areas as well as the different tiers of care facilities within its own area. Instead of one effective tier one hospital, it’s a group of different tier hospitals and community centers covering a disperse area that operate as one effective unit/network. This working network must be formalized and stabilized, and most importantly, accountability must be clear. What I’m talking about goes beyond the collaborative partnerships that are initiated today by leading hospitals and international development organizations; I’m really talking about a formal accountability structure with a sound plan to implement and keep the hub-and-spoke operation smooth, consistent and efficient like a well-oiled engine in all parts of China’s health system. International development organizations such as Project HOPE and private sector organizations such as Pfizer can help effectively structure these networks and introduce appropriate innovations. Success in this effort will not only help to address the parity gap, but it will also go a long way to help alleviate key aspects of the accessibility issue. In effect, patients’ concerns with adequate care levels may be irrelevant as they will be able to go to different points in the web network and get the same network of care and service.
  
3. A third critical aspect that must be addressed to move towards health parity in China is the training of its healthcare workers and professionals as that directly impacts the quality of care and service levels available to patients. To address this, standardizing on a tier-training model for new healthcare professionals, implementing an ongoing ‘stay current and relevant’ education requirements for professionals in practice, imposing a practical certification and accreditation program, and most importantly, cultivating an environment that attracts, develops, and maintains an adequate pool of healthcare professionals are core principles to having a quality healthcare workforce. The advantages China has include the following: it has talent and experience within; it has willing and excellent international partnerships; and most importantly, there are established international standards that China can leverage. Surprisingly to me, healthcare professionals especially doctors in China are not held in high regard as other healthcare providers in developed nations such as the United States. Unfortunately, the Chinese public has misplaced negativity and can treat healthcare professionals poorly, which is one of the root causes for not attracting adequate talent in this field. Perhaps a bold and strong campaign is necessary to put this aspect to rest; the public must know that China values its doctors and will go far to protect doctors from unjust treatment. In addition, China must cultivate an environment that will build its pool of healthcare professionals as the shortage of doctors and nurses creates multiple challenges. Two examples of these challenges include the pressure on the existing healthcare professionals resulting in unhealthy working hours and stressful conditions, and the inadequate time spent between doctors and patients contributing to communication and trust issues.
  
4. A fourth and final point that I believe must be addressed to adequately reach health parity is leveraging technology to facilitate a more reliable and seamless flow of timely information. China’s success is and will be driven by progress it makes in improving

service delivery at all points in its web of care. It will be necessary to leverage technologies to facilitate record keeping and tracking of care and costs by enabling access to electronic records. Technology must be implemented in a practical and thoughtful way to support the healthcare professionals, patients and families, as well as health care providers and administrators such as hospitals and government. To provide patients with comprehensive and holistic care, healthcare professionals must be able to access patient profiles to get a complete and accurate history, current conditions and medical regimen for diagnosing and treating the patient. Technology also has a vital role for healthcare professionals in training and accessing medical information at their fingertips when needed or convenience. As for patients, technology can help facilitate a smooth experience with reliability that doesn't require the patient to remember and carry around his/her medical information such as physical x-ray images to each point of care. When implemented properly, technology will support information privacy requirements while enabling a patient to enjoy a seamless and efficient healthcare experience. Finally for providers including administrators and government bodies, technology is an enabler to support effective tracking, evaluation and continuous improvement efforts. The technology will help to better manage information to develop baseline benchmarks, track indicators and understand trends to support actions and counter measures. For example, if indicators and information show that 5% of a specific population is consuming 40% of the services and associated costs, then perhaps specific programs can be implemented or creative measures can be taken to address the specific needs of that particular population while also easing the weight on the overall system.

The Chinese government is undertaking significant efforts to define and implement appropriate changes to reach the goal of providing comprehensive and effective healthcare to its citizens. In fact, there appear to be many successful pilot programs and exploration reform thorough China. However, it must leverage these successes and learning to move swiftly and thoughtfully to bring about healthcare parity as there are other threats and emerging epidemics such as China's growing aging population and the already mounting burden from non-communicable or chronic diseases. China will need to take necessary steps to stretch its capacity, raise healthcare priority similar to its transportation priority, and tackle multiple goals in a balanced and unified way as to not isolate and further divide its population.